

# To Abandon SALT Is to Blind the U.S.

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WASHINGTON — So far, most critics of President Reagan's decision to abandon SALT II have focused on the near-term prospect of a renewed arms race. Nearly as troubling is the possibility that our ability to gather intelligence about the Soviet Union's strategic forces will be severely handicapped. This could prove to be as dangerous to national security as the arms race itself.

Central to SALT and other arms control treaties is a carefully crafted framework of verification provisions that help each side keep track of the other's nuclear weapons. For the most part, both have observed these rules. This is an unheralded triumph of the arms control process.

One provision is the nonconcealment, noninterference rule. The Soviet Union may not hide its silos and mobile missiles, for example. Neither may it interfere with our reconnaissance satellites. Second are "cooperative measures." One says that a cruise-missile-carrying bomber must have observable differences between it and a similar bomber that cannot carry such missiles. Another requires prior notification of missile-test flights and confines them to a few agreed sites. When a missile or a submarine is retired, its silo or launch tubes must sit open for our satellites to inspect.

Third, there are the weapons limits of the treaty itself that channel future Soviet forces in relatively predictable directions. This helps our intelligence gathering and eases fears about sudden "breakouts."

On the whole, the verification framework has helped stabilize the strategic balance. When we know what the Russians are up to, we can tailor our forces accordingly and be confident that our deterrent is robust. When we don't know, we worry. Without reliable information, the most dire predictions can be taken as fact. Priorities are skewed, money wasted and the strategic balance destabilized. The bomber and missile "gaps" of the 1960's and early 1980's are two examples of this syndrome.

Consider what could happen without SALT. The Soviet Union might decide that, with an arms race starting, it would prefer for us to know as little as possible about its strategic weapons programs. Silos would be covered, mobile missiles camouflaged.

The Russians might also choose to interfere with our spy satellites: short of direct attack, this could be done by jamming or temporarily "blinding" them. Unannounced missile tests might be conducted over unfamiliar ranges, further hampering our ability to gather important data. And these data might be even more heavily coded — "encrypted" — than they already are.

Our Strategic Defense Initiative almost certainly will prompt Moscow to expand its inventory of strategic warheads. This could be done quickly by loading the huge SS-18 with 20 warheads or more. More deviously, the Kremlin could simply test launch an SS-18 and simulate the release of 20 warheads. This might force us to conclude that all SS-18's carry 20 warheads, whether they really do or not. And should Moscow conclude that we are preparing for protracted nuclear war, it might decide to secretly stockpile numerous spare missiles near silos or mobile launchers. Such stockpiling is illegal under SALT II because the arms would be impossible to monitor.

These are only some of the steps Moscow might take. It is not difficult to imagine others. The worry is not that we will find ourselves in the dark overnight. Our intelligence is good and we know a great deal about Soviet nuclear forces. But as these forces change over time, we will know less and less. New missile "gaps" will suddenly appear and our deterrent will be twisted to counter inflated or nonexistent threats.

The SALT process has seen the Soviet Union take reluctant steps toward a slight opening of its tightly closed society. A Soviet officer commented in Vienna in 1978, as he delivered the SALT II-required listing of nuclear forces, that his step reversed 400 years of Russian history. That small step in the right direction might now be replaced by a run in the other, toward secrecy. □

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